

“Rejoice as You Share in Christ’s Sufferings”

1 Peter 4:12-19; 5:6-11

Christ is risen!! He is risen indeed!! Alleluia!!

Last week, I told you that the underlying theme of Peter’s First Epistle is suffering. In six different places he gives counseling on suffering, and suffering is the major theme from the middle of chapter three all the way through the middle of chapter five. We see that theme continue in our Epistle reading today from chapters four and five.

We also read last week from Peter’s First Epistle that “Baptism now saves you” because the Word of God is combined with that water and comes to you. It is a washing of new life where you are filled with the Holy Spirit. You are filled with the Spirit of Truth. And we are encouraged to have confidence in this Word of God. Have confidence in our Baptism. Have confidence in the words of the Absolution. Have confidence in the God-breathed Word of Scripture. Have confidence in the body and blood of Christ broken and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

You were buried with Christ in Baptism. Jesus says, “It is finished.” Salvation is yours. There is no more that needs to be done for your salvation to be complete. Have confidence in this.

And having this confidence is important because fiery trials are not just coming, they are here. Peter says, “do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes . . . as though something strange were happening to you.” What is this fiery trial? Is this persecution? Yes. Is this suffering? Yes. Is any of this my own doing? Yes. This is one of the words in our Epistle reading that needs some clarification. (It is not the only one.)

The fiery trial is about persecution and outward persecution is coming, and Peter says, “If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed.” We spoke about this at length last week. That kind of persecution is a part of the Christian life. When Christ is seen and heard in your actions and words, the world will hate you, because, as Jesus said, “it hated me first.”

But the “fiery trials” are not just persecution in the classic sense of the word. I would say they have more to do with the passions that burn within you as a test or temptation for you. The translation of “fiery trial” is fine so long as we recognize that the fiery trial is often found inside of you. We are tested and tempted by the passions that burn within us. In our Bible study this week and next week, we are focusing on the petition of the Lord’s Prayer: “And lead us not into temptation.” Our prayer is that the testing of our faith is not so great that we succumb to that which entices or lures us away from the foundation of our faith, that is, from Jesus Christ.

I am called upon to recognize that the first and worst persecutor of me is me. The passions and desires of our Old Adam continue to wage war against the new man who has been baptized and raised up in Christ. Peter is saying that it is not a strange reality that you have to fight against your sinful desires while you wait for Jesus to return. We should expect that Satan is not going to allow the people of God to live peaceful and quiet lives in harmony around the Word of God. He attacks us from outside and from inside.

The catechism speaks of three spiritual enemies: the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. Two of the three we can try to escape from (but that doesn't really work either, because Satan doesn't leave us alone, and we are still in this world that hates us), and our body we know we always have with us so long as we are in this world. Peter is just saying what Paul says: "The good that I want to do, this I do not do, but the evil I do not want to do, this I keep on doing." That was Paul's lament. St. Paul went on to say, "I am the chief of sinners."

It shouldn't surprise us that Peter says, "finding yourself to be a sinner is what should be expected." I am a poor, miserable sinner, and my Old Adam persecutes me every day and has passions that burn within me – which is why we come before our Lord and confess our sin and receive God's grace with such joy.

When you are feeling empty, alone, isolated – not so full of the Holy Spirit – remember Peter's words "Baptism now saves you." Say the words, "I am baptized." Remember your Baptism, seek the Absolution, hunger and thirst for the body and blood of Christ, and you will be filled.

And when you keep reading Peter's letter, he doesn't just end and leave you in the fiery trials of you burning with passion. He says, "rejoice as you share in Christ's suffering." But that isn't the kind of rejoicing I want to do. "Sharing in Christ's suffering?" What kind of "rejoicing" is this?

This is rejoicing in the way the Bible usually talks about rejoicing. This is not simply happy, joyous euphoria that lasts for a little while. This is the joy of a slave being released from his chains. This is the joy of the drowning man rescued out of the depths. This is the joy of the crushing burden being lifted off of your shoulders. This is the joy of salvation.

You share in Christ's sufferings. His suffering was for you. He broke the chains of your bondage. He rescued you out of the depths. He calls you and says, "Come to Me all you who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest."

This is the joy of salvation. This is the eternal rest that we long for. In the meantime, even if we are not suffering or persecuted from the outside, we endure the fiery trial of our own flesh persecuting us with passions that burn within.

The problem is that we all have these sinful passions – again, even Paul calls himself the “chief of sinners.” So, when Peter asks, “what will be the outcome for those who do not ‘obey’ the Gospel?” It raises a big red flag. How can the “Gospel” (which means good news – the good news of salvation in Christ which we have received by grace, through faith, apart from works, as St. Paul says); how can we “obey” this?

If you have regularly been in Bible class with me, you know the answer. This is one of the words that English translators continually get wrong. It can mean “to not obey” but it can also mean “to disbelieve.” Why our English translators want to turn this word and other similar words into obeying rather than hearing and believing the Gospel boggles the mind. (It actually doesn’t boggle the mind. Almost all of our English translators have a theological background steeped in the theology of John Calvin and Jacob Arminius. So having a legalistic lean actually isn’t surprising).

Salvation is not about obeying the Gospel enough (whatever that would mean), and that is a good thing since we constantly have these tempting passions burning within us. Rather, rejoice that you share in Christ’s sufferings, that He has broken your chains, pulled you out of the depths, and has given you rest. That is the Gospel He has called you to hear and believe. And what will be the outcome of these who believe the Gospel of God? Who are joined with Christ? Who are buried with Christ in Baptism? Christ is risen!! St. Paul tells us that on account of your Baptism you have risen to a new life in Christ. He is risen indeed!! And so will you rise on the Last Day. Alleluia!! Amen.